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ABSTRACT

One of 52 theoretical papers on school crime and its relation to poverty, this chapter states that careful examination of juvenile crime reveals that it is primarily a subcultural phenomenon. The principal types of juvenile crime, such as drug use, vandalism, and theft, are usually committed by groups with their own distinctive attitudes, values, and perspectives--groups of juveniles who are part of a deviant subculture. Given this fact, the role of the schools in the etiology of deviant subcultures becomes highly important. Several recommendations for school policy are made on the basis of subculture theory, including the restructuring of educational institutions to reduce the students' sense of alienation and status deprivation and the creation of programs to encourage involvement in nondeviant subcultures. (Author/MLP)

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DEVIANT SUBCULTURES AND THE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Careful examination of juvenile crime reveals that it is primarily a subcultural phenomenon. The principal types of juvenile crime, such as drug use, vandalism, and theft are usually committed by groups with their own distinctive attitudes, values, and perspectives -- in other words, groups of juveniles who are part of a deviant subculture. Given this fact, the role of the schools in the etiology of deviant subcultures becomes highly important. Three conditions must usually be present for a subculture to develop among a group of people -- a common set of problems, a common structural position, and differential interaction. Examination of the school environment shows all three conditions to be present, in addition to other influences conducive to the formation of deviant subcultures. Several recommendations for school policy can be made on the basis of subculture theory, including the restructuring of our educational institutions to reduce the students' sense of alienation and status deprivation and the creation of programs to encourage involvement in nondeviant subcultures. Finally, a basic dilemma must be faced in attempting to deal with student deviants. If "problem students" are isolated in special classes or institutions, ideal conditions are created for the development and strengthening of deviant subcultures. But if those students are allowed to stay in regular classes, the chances their deviant behavioral patterns will spread to other students are greatly increased.

Introduction

The laws of physics state that for every action there is an opposite but equal reaction, and in many ways this is true of human society as well. No matter what the official objectives of a particular social institution or program, it inevitably produces a variety of unintended consequences. The remarkable advances in public sanitation and medical care have slashed the death rates, but they have also left many parts of the world facing staggering problems of overpopulation. Our prisons, which were intended to deter crime, have too often become its breeding grounds. This paper will examine some of the ways in which our educational system unintentionally encourages deviance among the young. More specifically, the focus will be on the school's role as a shelter and breeding ground for the deviant subcultures which promote juvenile crime.

The Nature of Juvenile Crime

In order to understand the school's role in juvenile crime, we must first formulate a clear picture of the nature of that kind of behavior. For, contrary to some popular stereotypes, juvenile criminals are not just younger versions of adult criminals. The crimes

committed by youthful offenders have marked qualitative and quantitative differences from those committed by adults. In fact, somewhere between a quarter and a third of the juveniles in correctional facilities in the United States are status offenders and have been incarcerated for behavior that would not even be against the law for an adult (Sanders, 1976).

Types of Offenses

Data from several different sources clearly show different patterns of offenses for juveniles and adults. The F.B.I. data on the crimes reported to the police are of no value here, since it is impossible to determine if the reported crimes were committed by juveniles or adults. The Uniform Crime Reports do, however, break down their statistics on arrest by age, and even a cursory examination of these data reveals some significant variations. Adults are much more likely to be arrested on charges relating to the use of alcohol -- drunkenness, driving under the influence, or disorderly conduct -- than for any other reason. A distant second are the property crimes -- burglary, larceny-theft, and fraud. Third are the violent crimes particularly the various forms of assault. On the other hand, the pattern of

arrest for offenders under 18 is much different. Property crimes, particularly larceny-theft, head the list of juvenile offenses. Second are the status offenses (runaway and curfew violation are the only two status offenses listed in the F.B.I. arrest statistics). The third most common reason for the arrest of a juvenile is narcotic law violations (Uniform Crime Reports, 1973). So, from these data, it appears that violent and alcohol-related crimes are significantly less important among juveniles than among adults, while narcotic law violations are more important. However, the interpretation of arrest records as an accurate reflection of actual behavior is open to serious question. The number of persons arrested for various crimes undoubtedly reflects the enforcement priorities, procedures, and expectations of police agencies, not simply the actual amount of crime.

Another important source of data on juvenile crime consists of self-reports (surveys of juveniles which ask them to report any crimes they may have committed). Of course, such survey data have an obvious problem of reliability, since some respondents undoubtedly try to conceal their criminal behavior. Nevertheless, these surveys do provide valuable data which are entirely independent of the official criminal justice statistics.

Furthermore, surveys of self-reported crime among juveniles by Short and Nye (1958), Erickson (1971), Gold and Reimer (1972), and others, generally agree on the relative frequency of the major types of juvenile crime. All these surveys found drinking to be the most commonly reported deviant behavior among juveniles. Other frequently mentioned offenses included theft and various types of status offenses -- particularly truancy. Fights between individuals were also commonly reported; gang fights were rarer. These surveys do not, however, agree about the extent of juvenile drug use. The earlier surveys show very little drug use, while the later surveys show a general increase in the use of drugs, particularly marijuana. After surveying juveniles in 1967 and again in 1972, Gold and Reimer (1972) concluded that the use of marijuana and other illicit drugs had increased substantially, but other forms of delinquency had declined among boys and remained steady among girls.

Juvenile crime is overwhelmingly a group phenomenon. The vast majority of juvenile offenses are committed in groups, not by single individuals. One major source of data consists of the studies based on official criminal statistics. In general, they show a high percentage of

group crimes among juveniles (Clinard, 1959). Erickson (1971) analyzed 11 such studies, conducted in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and found that 85 percent of the more than 19,000 cases studied involved group violations. Of course, it is possible that juveniles are simply more likely to be caught when they commit crimes in a group. But even the self-report data show a high percentage of group crime. In Gold and Reimer's 1972 survey, 92 percent of the boys and 97 percent of the girls who smoked marijuana reported that they did it in groups. Erickson's (1971) own survey found only 1 of the 18 juvenile offenses investigated to be more commonly committed by single individuals than by groups. He found the rates of group participation to be between 70 percent and 80 percent for theft, drinking, and narcotics use, and only slightly lower for violent offenses, such as armed robbery and fighting.

The Impact of Deviant Subcultures

A complete explanation of the causes of juvenile crime is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in order to understand the role of the school in juvenile crime, it is necessary to investigate the role of one major criminogenic influence -- the deviant subculture.

The Definition of a Deviant Subculture

First popularized by Milton Gordon (1947), the concept of the subculture has proven to be one of the most useful in all of social science. A subculture is essentially a culture within a culture -- that is, a segment of the main culture which has its own unique characteristics yet still shares some of the characteristics of the main culture as well. Many sociologists define a subculture as a distinct set of norms and values shared by a specific group within a society. However, subcultures contain more than just norms and values. Each also contains its own unique construction of reality, which gives meaning and order to the lives of its members. Through this web of meanings, definitions, norms, and values, a subculture encourages certain types of behavior and discourages others.

Although all subcultures are different from the dominant culture in some way, they are not necessarily deviant. A subculture is considered deviant only if it includes ideas and beliefs which the dominant culture condemns. So while the subculture of fundamentalist Christians may merely be different from the dominant culture, the subcultures of orgiastic Eastern cults are usually considered deviant. Of particular importance

for our purposes here is the fact that deviant subcultures encourage deviant behavior such as the juvenile crimes we have been discussing.

Deviant Subcultures and Juvenile Crime

The fact that most juvenile offenses are committed in groups provides strong, but not conclusive, evidence of the importance of deviant subcultures in juvenile crime. Using Erickson's self-report data, we find substantial differences in group participation between different types of juvenile offenses. Property offenses were usually committed in groups with a "group violation rate" ranging from 71 percent (for theft, two to fifty dollars) to 91 percent (for destruction of property). Data on the use of alcohol and other drugs showed similarly high rates of group participation. However, the status offenses are apparently more likely to be committed by single individuals. Erickson found a fairly high group violation rate for truancy (60 percent), but only half of the runaways and less than 20 percent of the cases of "defying parents" were committed in a group context.

Of course, just because juvenile crimes are usually committed in groups does not necessarily mean that the offenders are involved in a deviant subculture. Fortunately,

there is a considerable amount of independent evidence on this point. A great deal of research has been devoted to the so-called drug culture, and there can be little doubt that the use of marijuana and other illicit drugs is clearly a subcultural phenomenon (Coleman, 1976; Goode, 1972; Brecher, 1972; Becker, 1963). Most young drug users first develop an interest in illicit drugs from contact with the drug subculture, and become more and more deeply enmeshed in that subculture as their drug use continues. It is doubtful that any substantial number of people would use marijuana or other illicit drugs were it not for the influence of the drug culture.

A quick examination of some of the many descriptions of violent juvenile gangs shows that they, too, are part of a very distinct subculture (e.g., Dawley, 1973; Keiser, 1969; Thomas, 1967). The gangs have their own norms, values, and perspectives, which are obviously conducive to criminal behavior. Even young people who are not actually members of a gang are likely to be influenced by gang culture if they live, work, or go to school in an area with a great deal of gang activity.

While it is generally recognized that drug users and members of violent gangs are part of their own

distinct subcultures, that is not the case for young property offenders. Since most adults who commit property offenses are not part of a clearly defined subculture, young property offenders are often thought to be simply single individuals out for personal profit. Current research, however, shows that most young property offenders are part of what Irving Spergel (1964) calls a "theft subculture." As we have already pointed out, most juvenile property crimes are committed in groups. Such groups tend to have a very specific set of attitudes and values which encourage or justify property crimes, while often rejecting other sorts of deviant behavior (Short, 1968). Further, much of the motivation for juvenile property crimes appears to be "kicks," or thrills, rather than the desire for financial gain as in the case of adult criminals.

Of course, the theory of deviant subcultures is not a complete explanation of juvenile crime. It cannot explain why some juveniles participate in a deviant subculture while others with similar opportunities do not or why some juveniles commit crimes on their own. Nevertheless, an understanding of the powerful influence deviant subcultures exert on many young people is critical to the understanding of juvenile crime and the role the

schools play in its development.

Deviant Subcultures and the Schools

Now that the importance of deviant subcultures in the etiology of juvenile crime has been established, we must examine the role of the schools in the creation and maintenance of such subcultures. In order to address this question we will first consider the conditions which foster the growth of deviant subcultures and then examine our schools to see if such conditions are present.

Theories of Subculture Formation

The formulation of a comprehensive theoretical explanation of any aspect of human behavior is a complex and difficult undertaking. The origins of many subcultures can be more clearly understood by a particularistic historical analysis, rather than more general theoretical formulations. For instance, the origins of the Irish or Italian subcultures in the United States are more easily explained by the historical circumstances surrounding their immigration and the reactions of the society into which they entered, than by complex theoretical analyses. Nevertheless, theory does help us to understand the reasons historical events unfolded in the way they did.

And, more important, it provides grounds for predicting the future course of events and making concrete policy decisions which historical analysis alone can never provide.

A great many social scientists have put forward hypotheses concerning the general causes of subculture formation (Hollingshead, 1939; Lewis, 1961; Gans, 1962; Shibutani, 1955; Spergel, 1966). However, few have carefully investigated this issue. The first sustained attempt to develop a theory of subculture formation was made by Albert Cohen (1955). Following the lead of many earlier writers, Cohen held that subcultures were essentially a response to the common problems shared by a group of people. Indeed, from Cohen's perspective, all human action is an ongoing series of efforts to solve problems. Since human problems are as much in the perspective of the actor as in the external situation, Cohen felt that effective solutions must entail some change in the actor's frame of reference. Subcultures, then, develop out of a group's effort at problem solving and the shifts in perspective that it requires.

The principle alternative to Cohen's theory was set forth by David O. Arnold (1970). The focus of

Arnold's theory of subculture formation is differential interaction among groups of people, rather than their common problems. More specifically, Arnold argues that two things are necessary for the development of a subculture among a group of people. First, they must have the same structural position in the social system. Second, members of the group must have more frequent interaction with each other than with people from other segments of society. In sum, Arnold feels that subcultures develop out of the intensive interactions of people in the same structural position as they develop their own beliefs, norms, and values.

Although these two theories emphasize different aspects of the process of subculture formation, they need not be considered contradictory. In fact, they complement each other quite well. The conditions specified by both Cohen and Arnold -- a common structural position, mutual problems, and differential interaction -- all contribute to the likelihood of the development of a subculture among a group of people.

While the work of Cohen and Arnold has helped to create a comprehensive theoretical framework for the explanation of subculture formation, it tells us little about the forces which promote the development of deviant

rather than nondeviant subcultures. In many cases it appears that the deviance actually precedes the subculture. A subculture then develops in response to the common problems shared by the group of deviants. For example, this kind of subculture formation occurred among opiate users in the United States. Before the prohibition of opiates, most users were isolated individuals with little interaction, who often did not even consider themselves deviant. But the prohibition of opiates forced those who continued to use the drugs into closer and closer association in order to secure their supplies and protect themselves from society's hostility. As a result, a distinct subculture soon developed (Coleman, 1976).

On the other hand, the development of a new subculture may be the stimulus for various sorts of deviant attitudes and behavior, rather than a reaction to them. The chances that a developing subculture will become deviant are influenced by many variables. The more deviants who are in the group in which a subculture is developing, the greater the likelihood that the subculture itself will be considered deviant. Structurally, there is a greater chance of the development of a deviant subculture among subordinate groups which are not

politically, socially, or economically integrated into the dominant elites. The more status and rewards a group receives from the dominant culture, the less inclined its members will be to risk their favored position by challenging the dominant value system. And, at the same time, the more powerful a group is, the less likely it is to be labeled as deviant (Becker, 1963; Lofland, 1969). For instance, it seems doubtful that marijuana would ever have been prohibited if it had originally been popular among business executives or some other powerful group, rather than the poor and the minorities.

The School Environment

The task of assessing the impact of the schools upon the development of deviant subcultures is certainly not an easy one. There are so many different variables which influence the development of a deviant subculture that it is extremely difficult to single out one factor and determine its individual contribution. However, since the theoretical framework just presented does describe some of the conditions which promote the growth of deviant subcultures, it is a relatively simple matter at least to determine if such conditions are present in our school

system.

Albert Cohen's (1955) influential study of delinquent boys is undoubtedly the most comprehensive analysis of the role of the schools in the development of deviant subcultures to date. For Cohen, delinquent subcultures are a response to the problem of status deprivation among working-class boys, and he feels that the schools play a major role in creating and aggravating this problem. According to his theory, working-class boys feel a sense of status deprivation when they come to realize that they have less of the things that are valued by American culture than do middle-class boys. This deprivation includes material possessions and so-called status symbols, as well as social and academic skills. The working-class boys might solve this problem by simply avoiding contact with the middle class, but they cannot do that because the schools they are forced to attend are middle-class institutions based on middle-class values. So, being unable to avoid middle-class values and attitudes, they reject them and form delinquent subcultures which give them status for the things they can do better than middle-class youth can (i.e., fighting and toughness).

As plausible as Cohen's theory sounds, it has little

empirical support. Status deprivation may be an important problem among working-class juveniles, but there are certainly many others as well. And it is not at all clear that the rewards the schools give to middle-class students, such as high grades, are really of such great importance to working-class students. Finally, Cohen's theory totally ignores the important problem of middle-class delinquency. But, despite these problems, this theory does shed some much-needed light on the role of the schools in juvenile crime.

An examination of the school environment reveals the presence of all the conditions conducive to subculture growth. By definition students hold a common structural position in the social system. They also share many common problems. Some of these come from the schools themselves, such as completing homework assignments, passing examinations, and dealing with the school bureaucracy. Other problems are common to all people of school age, such as coping with parental authority or the ubiquitous problems of adolescence. Finally, students clearly engage in differential interaction with each other. They generally spend much more time in interaction with other students, both in and outside the schools, than with any other group of people.

But not only is the school environment conducive to subculture development in general; it also contains excellent conditions for the growth of deviant subcultures. Most students are cut off from the adult world of power and authority by virtue of their age alone. And, to aggravate the problem, the schools themselves are too often rigid authoritarian institutions run on inflexible rules which impose harsh restrictions on the students merely for the sake of "maintaining authority." As a result, feelings of frustration and alienation are common (see Kozol, 1967; Silberman, 1970). Yet there is virtually nothing most students can do to gain power over their own lives without violating the standards set for their behavior. Under such conditions, it should not be surprising that many students feel little allegiance to "the system." And, at the same time, they have less to lose than most by challenging it. Few of them have families to support, good jobs, high status, or special social privileges. Punishments such as expulsion from school usually do not have immediate negative consequences, and might even be welcomed by some. Even the criminal justice system gives special leniency to youthful offenders. In sum, the juvenile receives fewer

positive rewards for going along with the dominant moral order and less punishment for challenging it. Certainly, such conditions are bound to be conducive to both individual and subcultural deviance.

Of course, just because conditions conducive to the development of deviant subcultures are present in the schools, it does not necessarily mean that such subcultures will actually develop, or that the schools are the major cause if they do. Many of the conditions described above are characteristic of all adolescents in our society, and would probably continue to exist with or without the influence of the school system. Nevertheless, there seems to be little doubt that our school system often provides a powerful stimulus to the development of deviant subcultures among the young.

Implications For School Policy

From a pragmatic point of view, the central question in the study of juvenile crime is what we can do to prevent it. Since it is extraordinarily difficult to change the family or neighborhood environment of potential delinquents, the schools often seem to be the ideal agency to handle juvenile crime prevention programs. However, there is only so much we can realistically expect of our school system. By the very nature of the

institution, practically any school is likely to create conditions which foster the development of various subcultures. The key is to implement programs which discourage the formation and transmission of deviant subcultures.

Structural Change

One of the most appealing responses to the problem of juvenile crime would be to restructure the schools to eliminate the conditions which promote the development of deviant subcultures. Unfortunately, that is much easier said than done. Many of the conditions which foster deviant subcultures in our schools are created not so much by the schools themselves, but by the position of young people in society as a whole. Nevertheless, there are some programs which might help the school system to deal with the problem of juvenile crime.

One approach would be to improve lower-class students' academic performance in order to reduce their sense of status deprivation. In fact, several programs have already tried to bring about such improvements. The most well known was the Head Start program, which set up special preschools and compensatory education programs for disadvantaged children. Evaluation of the Head Start program shows that the improvements its students

made in the early years of school did not carry over into the higher grades. If compensatory education programs are to achieve any long-range improvements in academic performance among disadvantaged students, they will probably have to be continued right up through high school. And that, of course, means that the taxpayers would have to devote a great deal more money to education than they have so far shown themselves willing to do.

Another, less costly approach would be to restructure the rules and regulations governing students' behavior in order to reduce their feelings of frustration and alienation. Many of our junior and senior high schools have long traditions of petty authoritarianism which go far beyond the discipline necessary to achieve their institutional goals. The elimination of all the rules and regulations which cannot logically be shown to improve educational achievement would probably go a long way toward reducing student frustration with the educational system. Dress codes, the prohibition of smoking, arbitrary restriction of students' freedom of movement, and the prohibition on talking even when it is not disruptive to the classroom are a few examples of such unnecessary rules which can easily be changed. However, there is a limit to how far such reforms can go without jeopardizing

the quality of education. A certain amount of discipline and control is required in any complex bureaucratic organization, and that is particularly true of the schools. The key is to make the rules more rational and reasonable so that the students can see that the restrictions placed on their behavior are necessary for their education, and not just the arbitrary whims of the school administration.

Crime Prevention Programs

A number of schools have educational programs designed to prevent various sorts of juvenile crime. Drug education classes are probably the most common example. The basic idea behind such programs is to inform the students of the dangers of drug use, and thereby discourage it. However, drug education programs often have the opposite effect from the one intended. Repeated discussions of drugs and their effects appear to be just as likely to excite students' interest in drugs as to discourage it. When a drug subculture is present in the school (as it almost always is), its members are likely to challenge the conclusions of their instructors, and perhaps even launch their own campaign of proselytization. Other sorts of educational programs, such as lectures by criminal justice officials or informal sessions where

students meet local police officers, are unlikely to produce such negative results. However, there is insufficient evidence to indicate whether or not such programs actually produce any positive results.

A different approach to the prevention of juvenile crime would be to encourage the students' participation in nondeviant subcultures. Hopefully, the students who are actively participating in such subcultures would have little time or interest left for deviant activities. Of course, many schools already have programs which encourage athletics, music, drama, art, and other extracurricular activities. But a greater emphasis on such programs might bring gratifying results, particularly if they were aimed directly at the students who seem most likely to become involved in deviant activities.

Responding to Student Deviance: A Basic Dilemma

Schools face a basic dilemma when they attempt to deal with deviant students. If they allow the deviant student to remain in regular classes, they run the risk that he or she will help spread a deviant subculture to others. On the other hand, the chances of spreading a deviant subculture are reduced by isolating deviant

students in special classes or schools. But officially labeling these students as discipline problems and putting them into special classes where they are forced to interact with each other are likely to reinforce their deviant self-images and behavioral patterns. Special classes made up entirely of "discipline problems" provide an ideal environment for the solidification and reinforcement of whatever deviant subcultures may already exist among the students. So school officials are faced with a choice between two undesirable alternatives -- one of which is likely to encourage the spread of deviant subcultures and the other to encourage their growth and development.

Faced with such a difficult choice, there is no substitute for sound judgment on an individual case-by-case basis. However, subculture theory can provide some sound advice. From a theoretical perspective, the worst possible course of action is to place deviant students in special classes in the same school with "regular" students. This not only encourages the development and intensification of deviant subcultures among the "special" students, but also puts them in close enough proximity to the rest of the student body to enable the subculture to spread. In general, the best response to minor acts

of deviance, such as drinking or marijuana smoking, is simply to ignore them as much as possible, or perhaps issue minor reprimands. A more severe reaction risks stimulating the development of a deviant subculture by reinforcing a deviant self-image in the students who are labeled as troublemakers and encouraging differential interaction among them.

Of course, some violations are simply too serious to ignore, and more drastic action must be taken. In such cases, the best response is probably to expel the students involved, since that will reinforce the idea that their behavior is unacceptable, and at the same time isolate the deviants from any unnecessary interaction with other students. Arrangements should, of course, be made for the provisional readmission of such students if they show a renewed willingness to conform to the expected standards. The others might be encouraged to attend adult education classes, where their influence on the other students is likely to be minimal. Referral to the juvenile justice system is best used as a last resort for students who have committed serious criminal offenses.

Conclusions

While it is clear that the insights gained from

subculture theory can help the schools deal with the difficult problem of juvenile crime, we must conclude on a cautionary note. Americans have an enormous, and in many ways excessive, faith in education. From poverty to racial discrimination, no matter what the social problem, we almost instinctively turn to our educational institutions for a solution. But the schools are only one piece in the intricate puzzle of juvenile crime. An effective solution to this vexing problem requires social changes which reach far beyond the schools into the basic fabric of our society. The schools are a logical place to begin to address the problem of juvenile crime, but if that is as far as our efforts go, there is little hope for the kind of significant long-term improvements which could be achieved with a broader, more comprehensive attack on the problem.

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